

Rogues with Class

By Skip Williams



A rogue is one of the most versatile characters in the game. Her wide range of skills offers ease of customization, and her sneak attack ability makes her deadly in combat. But how can you get the most play value out of a rogue while minimizing the risks to her?

The Pros and Cons of a Rogue

The rogue has more nicknames among veteran players than any other character class. She can be called locksmith, excellent treasure finder, sneak, just plain "thief," or any of a host of other colorful titles. Depending on how you create your rogue, any of these monikers could fit your character.

Rogue Assets

The rogue offers a useful array of game abilities that provide lots of room for customization. You can create a smooth-talking con artist, a cat burglar, a tomb breaker, or almost any kind of character in between. Below are several assets you have going for you when you choose a rogue.

- **Good Initiative Bonus:** A rogue should have a high Dexterity score, primarily because Dexterity provides her first line of defense and governs many of her best skills. But a high Dexterity score also gives her a high initiative bonus. As a result, rogues can get the drop on their opponents most of the time and are seldom caught unawares.
- **High Skill Points:** With a whopping eight skill points per level, even a rogue with a poor Intelligence score has plenty of skill points to spend.
- **Broad Skill Selection:** The rogue has a long list of class skills, which enables her to excel at character interaction, stealth, movement, perception, and more.
- **Good Reflex Saves:** A rogue uses the best save progression in the game for Reflex saves (see Table 3-1 in the *Player's Handbook*). This natural grace helps her avoid most effects that deal damage or entrap a creature, such as area spells, entanglement, and many traps.
- **Many Class Features:** The rogue gains lots of useful and deadly class abilities. The most infamous of these is the sneak attack, which allows her to hit opponents where it really hurts.

Rogue Weaknesses

As with any class in the D&D game, the rogue's advantages come at a price. Here are a few of the disadvantages you should keep in mind if you're considering a rogue character.

- **Poor Fortitude and Will Saves:** Rogues have the worst progression for Fortitude and Will saves in the game (see Table 3-1 in the *Player's Handbook*). Thus, they aren't good at shrugging off effects that attack

their bodies or minds.

- **Fairly Low Hit Points:** The rogue's 6-sided Hit Dice give her only a moderate number of hit points. Since her sneak attack ability is wasted if she doesn't get into at least the occasional fight, death is never far away.
- **Fairly Low Armor Class:** The fact that a rogue has proficiency with only light armor and none with shields leaves her with only a mediocre Armor Class. The combination of modest hit points and middling Armor Class usually means that a rogue can afford to fight a little, but she doesn't have much staying power in a pitched battle. A rogue can improve her defenses in various ways, but all of them deplete her resources.

Playing a Classy Rogue

Great rogues usually use the following techniques, so if you're a rogue, try to incorporate them into your strategy.

Stay Near the Action

Depending on what skills you select, your party may call on you to probe the way ahead for danger, pick locks, act as the group's diplomat, or fill some combination of those roles. And even if you don't have a regular task within the group, your sneak attacks depend on your ability to strike quickly when the opportunity arises. You can't perform any of these functions if you're skulking at the back of the party.

Weigh Your Risks

While it usually pays to be bold, avoid taking unnecessary chances and doing things that put the rest of the party in danger. Even if you're a whiz at opening locked doors or slinking ahead of the party, don't do so unless you have a pretty good idea of what you stand to gain. If the benefits you can expect from the intended action don't outweigh the risks, think up something else to do.

Keep Your Options Open

You can't always know what tricks and stratagems will work in a given situation, so always try to have a backup plan. Likewise, avoid actions that will limit your options in the future. Finally, remember that escape is often the best option when things go wrong, so always have a plan for getting out of whatever you've gotten into.

Keep Help Close at Hand

Try to avoid situations in which you must face danger alone. Even if you're party's scout, don't range so far ahead that your friends can't mount a rescue in a round or two. In a battle, consider who your best allies are.

The Party's Main Warrior: This character's combat abilities can often spell success or failure for you. By working together with him, you can flank your foes and bring your sneak attack ability into play. Likewise, this character is your best hope when you find yourself in a bind too tough to fight your way out of. On the other hand, your perception skills (such as Spot and Listen) are likely better than those of any fighter type, and your timely warning can prevent disaster from befalling this most important ally.

The Party's Arcane Spellcaster: This character is weaker and more vulnerable than you when it comes to physical combat, so be prepared to come to her aid when trouble arises. If the party's arcane spellcaster faces an

unexpected threat, you might be the only one who can get free to deal with the situation.

The Party's Divine Spellcaster: Get friendly and stay friendly with your party's cleric, druid, or paladin. This character's healing spells can stave off death, especially when you manage to get yourself poisoned or fall victim to some other debilitating attack. You may find that divine spellcasters cramp your style a little -- especially if they're straight arrows and you have a larcenous streak -- but make an effort to stay in their good graces.

Some Key Equipment

The right gear can help quite a bit with a roguish career. The essentials include the following.

- **Armor and Shield:** You'll probably want to stick with light armor to avoid compromising your rogue's best skills, but even light armor is better than none. Leather or studded leather offers decent protection without interfering with your stealth skills. As a rogue, you have no shield proficiency unless you burn a feat to get it, but a masterwork buckler won't cause you any difficulty even if you aren't proficient. A chain shirt is generally the best protection available to you, but it's expensive and hinders many of your skills.
- **Primary Melee Weapon:** Choose a light and handy weapon from among those with which rogues are proficient. A short sword or rapier is fairly effective, and both of those choices work with the Weapon Finesse feat, which allows you to use your Dexterity bonus for melee attacks. After all, your most potent combat ability -- sneak attack -- is useless if you can't hit your foes.
- **Backup Melee Weapon:** Always have a light weapon -- or two -- handy. A light slashing weapon, such as a dagger or hand axe, can help you get out of a tight spot (for example, being swallowed whole by a big monster). It also pays to have a hefty weapon on hand in case you lose your primary weapon or find that it isn't effective. Make sure this weapon deals a different kind of damage than your primary weapon does. For example, if you normally use a rapier (a piercing weapon), consider a mace (which deals bludgeoning damage) as a backup. A sap can also prove handy for subduing foes the party wishes to question later.
- **Ranged Weapon:** You can greatly increase your survival chances by keeping your foes at a distance during combat. If you can keep the range down to 30 feet or below, you even retain some ability to use sneak attack. A heavy crossbow deals excellent damage but has a slow rate of fire. A composite shortbow offers good range and allows for multiple attacks per round as your base attack bonus improves. And don't forget that daggers and hand axes can be thrown.

About the Authors

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies, and he served as the sage of *Dragon Magazine* for eighteen years. Skip is a codesigner of the **D&D** 3rd edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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